

Committee on Resources

Witness Testimony

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife & Oceans

Thursday, March 6, 1997

1324 Longworth HOB, 10:00 A.M.

STATEMENT OF WILLIAM HORN WILDLIFE LEGISLATIVE FUND OF AMERICA

MR. CHAIRMAN:

My name is William Horn and I am appearing on behalf of the Wildlife Legislative Fund of America (WLFA) and the 1.5 million hunters, anglers, and conservationists it represents. We greatly appreciate the opportunity to appear today and present testimony in strong support of H.R. 511.

The National Wildlife Refuge System represents 92 million acres of public land dedicated to wildlife conservation. With units in all 50 states, the System conserves a vast array of habitats and associated fish and wildlife. These public lands also provide irreplaceable recreational opportunities to hunt, fish, bird watch, and interact with North America's wildlife.

H.R. 511 would provide an organic act for the Refuge system and clearly spell out its mission and purposes to carry it into the 21st Century. It is a carefully refined measure that reflects the 1994 efforts of Senators Max Baucus (D-MT) and Bob Graham (D-FL), the bi-partisan leadership of the House Congressional Sportsmen's Caucus in the 104th Congress, contributions by the state fish and wildlife agencies via the International Association for Fish and Wildlife Agencies, and work by dozens of sporting conservation organizations. That careful work persuaded the House to pass essentially the same bill by a lopsided bi-partisan two-to-one majority on April 24, 1996.

This year's measure reflects further refinement. The WLFA supports the changes in H.R. 511 and is convinced that issues regarding land acquisition authorization, military overflights, and the consequences of government shutdowns should be dealt with in separate measures.

It is also apparent that, with one exception, there is wide-spread support for the bill's provisions. There seems to be little argument about the provisions specifying wildlife conservation as the system mission, defining the compatibility process, establishing Refuge unit planning requirements, recognizing state primacy over fishing and hunting regulation, expressly preserving Refuge water rights, and requiring that management decisions be based on scientific data and principles.

The debate focuses instead on one provision -- Section 4(d) -- which states that one of the six purposes of the Refuge system is "to provide opportunities for compatible uses of refuges, consisting of fish and wildlife dependent recreation, including fishing, hunting, wildlife observation, and environmental education."

Read this provision carefully. It does not mandate fishing and hunting on all Refuge units. It does require that fishing and hunting be compatible uses. It does not "commercialize" the Refuge system nor does it eliminate the wildlife conservation mission of the System. Note too that this is one of six specified

purposes; the other five are (1) habitat conservation, (2) conservation of migratory birds, (3) conservation and restoration of endangered species, (4) conservation of anadromous fish, and (5) fulfillment of international treaty obligations.

Why is it important to have compatible fishing and hunting made a purpose of the system? Very simple -- the sporting community needs a statutory shield from the animal rights fanatics who have made it their mission to terminate all fishing and hunting on the public's Refuge lands. The Fish and Wildlife Service has had to fight off lawsuits seeking to end hunting. And in virtually every Congress, bills are introduced to end these activities on Refuge lands. Making these activities merely a "priority use" gives America anglers and hunters short shrift. They should be entitled to a simple statutory declaration that providing compatible fishing and hunting is one of the purposes of the Refuge system. No federal judge, or no Secretary of the Interior, is going to be able to ignore or explain away such a straightforward plain spoken declaration recognizing that hunting and fishing have a place on Refuge lands.

The behavior of the bill's critics -- most notably the major environmental interests -- also demonstrate the need for a clear and plain declaration in support of hunting and fishing. H.R. 511 and H.R. 1675 have been the subject of an incredible campaign of distortion, disinformation, and misinformation. These critics have speciously alleged that the bill eliminates the conservation mission of the system (section 4 does precisely the opposite), mandates hunting and fishing everywhere (section 8 does the opposite), "commercializes" the Refuge system (section 4(a)(3) sets forth six "conservation" purposes) "drenches" the System in pesticide use, and allows grazing, oil and gas activity, and jet ski use everywhere (these sections must be written in invisible ink). H.R. 511 is an important wildlife conservation measure which will ensure that our Refuge system is managed effectively into the next century. And making compatible wildlife-dependent recreation a purpose of the System ensures that Congressional support for these traditional activities will not be misconstrued.

We appreciate the leadership this Subcommittee has played on this legislation and we look forward to working with you to quickly enact H.R. 511.

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